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ABSTRACT

In Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) on the Navajo Reservation, 92 percent of students come from homes where Navajo is the primary language, but many students entering school are not fluent in either English or Navajo. A survey of 23 educators examined the effects of language and culture on the likelihood that a student would be placed in special education classes. Although many respondents expressed concern about the potential mislabeling of Navajo students in off-reservation schools, KUSD was seen as a model provider of special education services for Native American students. KUSD school psychologists (who are Navajo) and other KUSD special education staff help to ensure that special education assessments are contextualized and culturally sensitive, use both the Navajo and English languages, occur over an extended period of time, and are conducted by a multidisciplinary team of educators and parents. Respondents also discussed the influence of the teacher's predominant culture and proficiency in English and Navajo on Navajo students' placement in special education, the need for teachers to be aware of the child's predominant culture and living conditions, the importance of family-school partnerships and difficulties in creating them, opinions about full inclusion, and particular disadvantages faced by very rural students. (SV)

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RURAL NAVAJO STUDENTS IN KAYENTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT'S SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS: THE EFFECTS OF HOME LOCATION AND LANGUAGE

Introduction

The Navajo Nation, the largest reservation within the United States, is equivalent to the size of West Virginia. In fact, "Diné Bikeyah, or Navajoland, is larger than 10 of the 50 states in America" (Navajo Nation Tourism, 2000). The Reservation covers 27,000 square miles, extending into three states: Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Approximately 250,000 Navajos reside on the Reservation which had been described as a vast land unique because the people "have achieved something quite rare: the ability of an indigenous people to blend both traditional and modern way of life" (Navajo Nation Tourism, 2000, p.3).

The Navajo Nation's tribal government was established in 1923 and has evolved into the largest and most sophisticated form of American Indian Government in the United States. The Nation has focused on retaining and passing on the unique cultural legacy to future generations. During the Second World War, the Navajo language and people played a vital role when the Navajo Code Talkers developed a secret code that was undecipherable by enemy forces. The efforts of the Code Talkers contributed to the United States success in the War, especially in the Pacific Theater.

Kayenta, Arizona is the home of the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD). Kayenta is located on the Navajo Reservation just twenty-one miles southwest of Monument Valley Tribal Park. Monument Valley is often described as the seventh wonder of the world. Kayenta is one of the Navajo Nation's largest communities with a population of 6500. It is the first reservation community in the USA to be incorporated as a township with a municipal tax base. The community has hotels, gas stations, a shopping plaza, laundromats, a large clinic, police station, fire station, post office, movie theater, women's shelter, car wash, restaurants, municipal offices, and a recreation center. It is surrounded by sandstone rock formations, mesas (a large rock plateau), volcanic rock outcrops, as well as grazing land for sheep, cows and horses.

Kayenta Unified School District has a current student enrollment of 2,626 ranging from grades kindergarten to twelve. Many students reside in the Kayenta community but many are also bussed in from the surrounding countryside. It is not uncommon for some students attending KUSD to travel on the bus two hours one way. The KUSD home language surveys indicate that Navajo is the primary language spoken in 92% of the students'

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homes, although few of the students are considered truly fluent in speaking the Navajo language. When students enter school, a great number are not fluent in either English or Navajo.

KUSD also boasts a unique cooperative venture between the District and Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education (NAU-CEE). Reaching American Indian Special/Elementary Educators (RAISE) is a program dedicated to providing education leading to a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education. RAISE is funded in part by the Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) and allows program delivery to cohorts of students in their local communities who spend one and one-half years together (Sealander, Eigenberger, Peterson, Shellady, and Prater, in press).

RAISE has been described as a program transported to the reservation. This *transporting* enables local participants to complete a degree program while remaining with their families, retaining their jobs, and sustaining their support networks (Heimbecker, Minner, & Prater, 2000). The marriage of theory and practice set in the context of the primarily Navajo culture, strengths, and needs are important aspects in the cohort program. (Sealander, Eigenberger, Peterson, Shellady, and Prater, in press).

Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to explore the potential relationship between Kayenta Unified School District Navajo students' home location, primary language spoken in the home, and involvement with the Special Education Program. We question whether students' who reside in extremely rural areas outside of Kayenta and have Navajo as a primary language, may be more likely to be assessed and placed in a special needs program than those students who reside in Kayenta and have English as a primary language. We wish to examine what other factors (i.e. the student's predominant culture) may have an influence on a student's placement in a special education program.

Our main objective is to present KUSD educators' (e.g. teachers and administrators) perspectives, beliefs, and opinions regarding factors they feel may be significant when considering a student's placement in a special education program. For example, survey questions are related to the role the student's home location, predominant culture, and language spoken at home may have played in a student's placement in the KUSD special education program. In addition, the District teachers' predominant culture and proficiency in English and Navajo were also explored. Professionals were asked whether they felt it was important to work in partnership with the student's families, and if so, how did KUSD achieve this.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper was collected by current members of the RAISE program under the supervision of their instructors from NAU-CEE. A 14-item questionnaire was developed and distributed to professionals in the KUSD. The selection process for recipients of the questionnaire included four categories of KUSD employees: 1) special education teachers, 2) special education department heads or former heads, 3) Navajo non-special education teachers and 4) Anglo non-special education teachers. Individuals from each category were selected from among the District's four different schools (primary school with grades K-2, intermediate school with grades 3-5, middle school with grades 6-9, and high school with grades 10-12). In addition, district level professionals were selected to include the Director of Special Education and two school psychologists. An attempt was made to balance both ethnic and gender variables. In addition to the questions asked demographic data to include ethnicity (Navajo and Anglo), professional status/ position, (e.g. teacher/grade, administrator), and gender were collected.

Twenty-seven questionnaires were distributed among KUSD teachers and employees, eliciting their perceptions, beliefs, and opinions regarding the placement of students in special education programs. Of the 27 questionnaires sent out 23 were returned for a return rate of 85%.

Survey Questions

- What factors may influence a student's placement in a Special Education program?
- In your opinion, does a student's primary language effect the assessment of a student being placed in the Special Education Program?
- Do you think there is a potential relationship between the student's home location, primary language spoken at home and involvement in the Special Education Program?
- Does a student's predominant culture have an influence on the student's placement into the Special Education Program?
- In your opinion, do you believe that a teacher's predominant culture and the teacher's proficiency in English and Navajo, might have an influence on their consideration of a student's placement in Special Education?
- Do you think that it is beneficial for teachers working with Navajo students on the Reservation to be aware that the school performance of some students may be influenced by where the child resides, the child's proficiency in English, the child's predominant culture, and other factors?
- Do you think that it is beneficial for teachers working with Native American students living off the Reservation or in urban centers, to be aware that the school performance of some students may be influenced by where the child had lived (reservation), the child's proficiency in English, the child's predominant culture, and other factors?
- Do you think it is important for teachers to work in a partnership with the student's families (home language and home culture), and how might this partnership affect a child being referred for placement in Special Education?
- Do you know if KUSD has developed and implemented intervention and inclusion programs as a growing partnership between teachers and families in the District?
- What are your thoughts concerning KUSD's efforts in getting teachers and families to work together in order to bridge the differences between the language and culture of the home, and the language and culture of the school?
- Is the bridge between the student's home and school important?
- In your opinion, do you think students from more rural areas face greater educational challenges than students from Kayenta?
- If yes, then what ideas might you have to better help rural students?
- Do you have any other opinions and beliefs resulting from this involvement?

Results

Returned questionnaires were evaluated by looking at the responses and identifying themes or patterns that emerged. The results are organized by question first followed by the themes or patterns.

1. ***What factors may influence a student's placements in a special education program?***

Respondents felt that several factors influenced a student's placement in the Special Education program. They are: 1) developmental history (i.e. whether the child was born premature), 2) educational history (i.e. attendance, test results, etc.), 3) kind of disability or presenting problem (i.e. blindness, physical disabilities, emotional behavior, continued behavior problems, trauma), 4) family history, and 5) interventions, tests and evaluations.

While few educators indicated language was a factor in placing students into special education programs one respondent noted, "On the Navajo Reservation our rural population utilizes the Navajo language. Very few parents speak fluent English. Therefore their children come to school with limited English…I believe language can be a big factor."

2. ***In your opinion, does a student's primary language effect the assessment of a student being placed in the Special Education Program?***

Responses to this question were equally split in three directions. One third of respondents answered "yes"- the language is taken into consideration. Another one third of respondents indicated that the language is not a factor in special education assessment. The remaining one third held mixed views about the role of language. As one KUSD educator stated, "Non-Navajo teachers who are not familiar with the Navajo way of life refer more dominant Navajo speaking students to the Special Education program because students require more response time and tend to struggle more with the English language (oral and written)."

3. ***Do you think there is a potential relationship between the student's home location, primary language spoken at home, and involvement in the Special Education Program?***

Most of the respondents agreed with the potential relationship between the students' home life and involvement in the Special Education program. They noted a child must be assessed in his or her dominant language using culturally relevant and familiar concepts. Some Navajo children have a lack of English language or exposure to vocabulary and many do not have modern appliances such as television, refrigerators, microwaves, etc.

The KUSD Special Education Director noted that the language and experiences at home along with the rural and remoteness of the home play major roles in the child's development. To that end the Director emphasized the importance of understanding the role educational disadvantage, socioeconomic status, and environmental differences play into the decisions regarding placement in special education programs. She noted that, "It is why it is important that the evaluator understands the whole child and at KUSD steps are taken to rule out language as a factor."

4. ***Does a student's predominant culture have an influence on the student's placement into the Special Education Program?***

Respondents were equally divided on this question with one half believing that predominant culture played a role in placement and one half believing it did not. All agreed that practices in KUSD prevented this from happening because culture as a factor is ruled out before placement in the Special Education program is suggested.

One teacher stated, "... in border town areas we get students who go to off reservation schools and end up in Special Education because of their cultural background and differences. However, when they come back to our district, we find many of the these students could have been served in the general education class and should not have been in special education."

Other respondents noted they did not think that, on average, the students culture played a role in placement in special education classes however, they believed it was more likely seen in the larger population areas and cities.

5. ***In your opinion, do you believe that a teacher's predominant culture and the teacher's proficiency in English and Navajo might have an influence on their consideration of a student's placement in special education?***

The majority responded they did not think that the teachers' culture and proficiency in English and Navajo had an influence on placement into special education. They noted that when referring a student for special education assessment, the multidisciplinary team reviews the student's educational history and related factors as it relates to educational environments. As with any referral, the teacher must document what interventions he/she has used with the child.

Eight of the respondents said they felt the more knowledgeable and sensitive a teacher is about the predominant culture coupled with proficiency in both Navajo and English, the better able he/she is to understand the student's abilities and support academic success.

6. ***Do you think it is beneficial for teachers working with Navajo students on the Reservation to be aware that the school performance of some students may be influenced by where the child resides, the child's proficiency in English, the child's predominant culture, and other factors?***

Respondents unanimously expressed strong feelings about a teacher's awareness of specific factors affecting the students' school performance. It was felt that generally their home location, proficiency in English,

culture, and other factors influence Navajo students. More traditional parents believe that academics belong at school and culture and Native teachings belong at home. Factors that may hinder a student's educational success included limited access to computers, running water, and electricity.

One school psychologist suggested that incoming teachers should attend a workshop to familiarize themselves with the Navajo language, culture, and taboos. Respondents also showed a concern for other minority children, (not just Native American children), and a teacher's obligation to all students. As one respondent noted, "All teachers working on the Navajo Reservation, or working with any minority group, should learn about the population they will be working with. Isn't that part of being professional"?

7. ***Do you think that it is beneficial for teachers working with Native American students living off the Reservation or in urban centers, to be aware that the school performance of some students may be influenced by where the child has lived (reservation), the child's proficiency in English, the child's predominant culture, and other factors?***

Almost all respondents agree that when working with Navajo students off the Reservation (i.e. in urban schools), teachers need to have a genuine interest in the student. Even though non-Anglo children are likely in the minority at an urban school, it is vital that the teacher be culturally sensitive and accountable for every child.

Many respondents expressed a concern about the potential mislabeling of Navajo students, resulting in those students being mistakenly placed in special education. When a teacher understands the cultural background of a student, mislabeling is more often prevented. One special education department head that worked in a urban city school stated "Absolutely! That is why an ESL endorsement is important for teachers of students who are not in the majority culture [even] in off the reservation schools... I worked in [a reservation school] and they don't have any Navajo psychologists, so [only] Anglos assess the kids.

8. ***Do you think it is important for teachers to work in a partnership with the student's families (home language and home culture), and how might this partnership affect a child being referred for placement in special education?***

All of the people interviewed agreed that teachers and families working in partnership will affect a child being referred for a placement in special education. It was noted that parents bring a wealth of knowledge about their child and his/her background that teachers would not know without a partnership between the home and school.

Many teachers expressed difficulty in creating a partnership, especially in the higher grade levels. Moreover, they maintained that information acquired from parents is necessary for intervention strategies, accommodations, and adaptations to be implemented to better serve the students' needs. As one Navajo general education eighth grade teacher stated, "I believe teachers should work in a partnership with students' families. Unfortunately I have found it difficult (for whatever reason) to work with students' families no matter how high or low the student may perform academically. It seems as if the older a student is, the more difficult it is to attain a partnership." This teacher based her opinion on eight years of teaching experience at primary, intermediate and middle school grade levels, while sometimes working with the same students. She found that parents who were very involved when their children were primary students, became less involved when their children were middle school students.

9. ***Do you know if KUSD has developed and implemented intervention and inclusion programs as a growing partnership between teachers and families in the District?***

The majority of respondents enthusiastically responded "Yes"! However, a smaller number strongly disagreed expressing diverse views to support their opinions. Some who disagreed said that only when the teachers were trained in special education, did they know how to use inclusion effectively. Many respondents expressed a need for more special education personnel because there simply was not enough time for the current staff to assist all students with special needs. Interestingly, while a former head of special education in a lower grade level school was very supportive of the current inclusion program in KUSD, a former head of special education now at an upper

grade school saw that some special education students' needs were clearly not being met with the current inclusion system.

Another respondent observed, "Yes, KUSD is the cream of the crop in comparison to other schools statewide". While others pointed out that, in their view, only physically challenged students were served in inclusive settings and students with more severe learning disabilities were not served in this inclusive setting. One respondent noted, "I did my own home visits during my own time."

10. What are your thoughts concerning KUSD's efforts in getting teachers and families to work together in order to bridge the differences between the language and culture of the home, and the language and culture of the school?

Most of the respondents commented that the KUSD needed to try harder and make more of an effort to get families and teachers to work together. Respondents felt that most of the barriers confronted involved the often long distances between student homes and schools, making it difficult for parents to come to the school for meetings, etc. The language and culture were not seen as obstacles to the District and family cooperation.

11. Is the bridge between the student's home and school important?

The majority of respondents agreed that a child's home situation does affect the child's academic success at school. Furthermore, what happens at school affects a child's home life. Consequently, the bridge between home and school is important. The school should not be solely responsible for making this bridge. The parents need to meet the school halfway and become involved in their child's schooling.

12. In your opinion, do you think students from more rural areas face greater education challenges than students from Kayenta?

Half of those surveyed felt students from rural areas face greater educational challenges due to great distances from school and long hours spent traveling on buses. However, the other half of our respondents disagreed with this stance stating that being from a rural area should not be a factor influencing a student's school success, nor should this be used as an "excuse" or "crutch". As one middle school teacher suggested, "It all depends on the individual student himself or herself because the opportunity is available to them [the student]."

13. If you answered yes (to question number 12), what ideas might you have to better assist rural students?

Those educators that felt rural students face greater challenges suggested that these students should read more and be assisted with additional supports such as extra teacher aides and home tutors to work with families. One school psychologist offered this excellent advice to rural students, "Don't make excuses, study hard, read more, be more dedicated, and dream."

14. Do you have any other opinions and beliefs resulting from this involvement?

The majority of respondents felt that increased parental involvement is needed within the educational system. In addition, a few educators suggested that more general education teachers need to have some training or certification in special education. "If you want your child to succeed in school, learning disability or not, take time to help your child. Provide encouragement, guidance and motivation."

Conclusion

Our preliminary research suggests that the Kayenta Unified School District is a model provider of Special Education Services for Native American students. Under the leadership of the KUSD Special Education Director, State and Federal special education laws and policies are enforced while at the same time being sensitive and aware of the Navajo culture, language, and lifestyle which affects every District student to varying degrees. With the help of KUSD school psychologists (who are Navajo) and other KUSD special education staff, special education assessments are contextualized, culturally sensitive, utilize both the Navajo and English languages, occur over an extended period of time, and are conducted by a multidisciplinary team including parents, classroom teachers, and

medical specialists (occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech pathologists, etc.). Most importantly, the staff overall are both caring and professional.

In KUSD factors such as culture are quickly ruled out, allowing the team to move through the pre-referral, referral, and evaluation process with confidence. Even if cultural factors or influences were not identified at the pre-referral level they are always a consideration during the actual assessment process. It is because of cultural awareness and sensitivity the team is able to make decisions for placement in special education programs, confident that the student is indeed in need of these services –not placed because of cultural or language differences. At KUSD the chances are slim that a student is placed in special education as a result of a disadvantage in language proficiency or other factors such as predominant culture."

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